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ABSTRACT

This paper examines resiliency and how it can be fostered through experiential programs. Resiliency is defined as the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social competence despite exposure to severe stress. A summary of research findings concerning resiliency presents the characteristics of resilient people, the defensive aspect of resilience, defensive versus coping responses, an experiential learning model of resilience, and organizational and instructional practices that help others develop resilience. The results of resiliency research may be incorporated in experiential programs through a paradigm shift from an "at-risk" perspective to one that views people as resources, as experts in their own lives, and as possessing innate mental health and well-being. The building of resilient people is a long-term process of healthy human development based on nurturing, participatory relationships that are grounded in trust and respect and reach toward valuable goals. Four causes of inappropriate behaviors and five ways to handle them are listed. Thirteen core competencies are outlined for program staff in resilience-focused programs. Contains 17 references. (TD)

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Handling Difficult Times and Learning Resiliency

(Are you working with the heartwood or just the bark?)

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ABSTRACT

Can we really teach people to handle adversity? What gives us resiliency so we can deal effectively with difficulties and grow stronger in the process? What are the success factors? First, we present a summary of important research findings. Then we look at ways to incorporate the results of resiliency research in experiential programs. Finally, we offer a list of resources to help bring a resiliency awareness and resiliency activities into experiential education programs.

Don't pray for easy times, pray for strength.
Don't pray for tasks equal to your powers, pray for
powers equal to your tasks.

— John F. Kennedy

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B. Baker

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What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore —
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over
Like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

— Langston Hughes

This poem by Langston Hughes closes a report of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, *Investing in Children and Youth, Reconstructing Our Cities: Doing What Works to Reverse the Betrayal of American Democracy* (1993). The poem and the report call for developing a country where dreams do not get deferred, where critical protective factors support courageous living of dreams, a sense of a bright future, a feeling that one has a place in the world, that one's life has a sense of meaning, purpose, and coherence.

As experiential educators, we have an opportunity to help participants in our programs experience critical protective factors that encourage the development of resilience. Resilience can be defined as the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social competence despite exposure to severe stress (Benard, 1991). The following summarizes some important results of the research on resilience which may guide the design and delivery of resilience-focused experiential programs.

Research Results Summary

1. Characteristics of Resilient People. Resilient people tend to . . .

   - have a sense of humor and alternative ways of looking at things.
   - use "adaptive distancing": the ability to separate themselves from their dysfunctional environment.

- have a sense of identity, the ability to act independently, and exert control over their environment.
- have a sense of purpose and high expectations (for themselves, or someone has high expectations for them).

(Benard, 1991)

- deal with challenges well regardless of controllability
- have good prosocial coping skills.

(Blechman & Culhane, 1993)

- not be overwhelmed with feelings of failure, alienation, uselessness, and impotence

(Barnard, 1994)

Not all authors agree on the most important characteristics of resilient people. Here is a comparison of the findings of four authors.

Resiliency Characteristics				
Characteristics	Rutter	Werner	Garmezy	Anthony
Had nondistressing habits at infancy		X		
Is good natured, has affectionate disposition	X	X		
Has relationship with a caring adult	X	X	X	X
Communicates effectively	X		X	
Has a sense of personal worthiness	X	X	X	X
Has a sense of control over "fate"			X	X
Is effective in work, play, and love			X	
Has a positive social orientation: is cooperative	X	X	X	X
Asks for help: is assertive			X	X
Is above-average in social intelligence	X		X	
Has an informal social support network	X	X	X	X
Has the ability to have close relationships	X		X	X
Has healthy expectations and needs		X	X	
Uses talents to personal advantage	X			
Delays gratification	X	X	X	X
Has internal focus of control	X	X	X	X
Is flexible	X		X	
Has belief in his or her self-efficacy		X	X	X
Has a desire to improve			X	
Has interpersonal sensitivity	X	X		
Has problem-solving ability	X	X	X	X
Has decision-making ability			X	X
Has a future orientation	X	X		
Has trust in others and hope for the future			X	X

Exhibits and manages a range of emotions			X	X
Productive critical thinking skills	X	X	X	X
Sense of humor	X	X	X	X

2. The Defensive Aspect of Resilience. Researchers point out that resilient people can defend themselves well against adversities in their environment. Resilience can be thought of as an antibody that enables warding off attacks. Anthony (1978) uses the following diagram to model the defenses that may be used to protect people from adversity in their environment.

Figure 1-1. The buffering system of the human organism against undue excitation.

Based on the work of Kroeber (1963), these defenses may have a negative effect on the user ("Defensive Response") or positive effect on the user ("Coping Response"). The following table compares defensive responses and coping responses by personality function.

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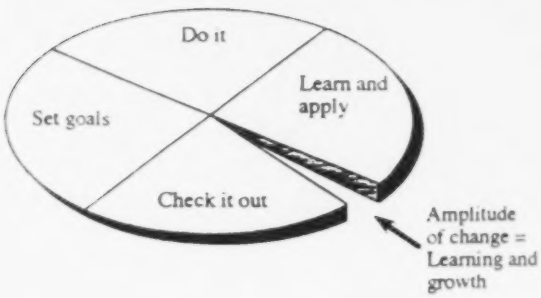
Defensive and Coping Responses

Personality Function	Defensive Response	Coping Response
Discrimination	Isolation	Objectivation
Detachment	Intellectualization	Intellectual activity
Symbolization	Rationalization	Logical analysis
Attention	Denial	Focused Activity
Sensitivity	Projection	Empathy
Postponement	Procrastination	Frustration tolerance
Remembering	Wishful regression	Reflection to learn
Preserving self	Fight or flight response	Conflict resolution
Depending on others	Pull/push reaction	Build support systems, trust
Handling challenge	Avoid/overwhelm	Problem solving

3. An Experiential Learning Model of Resilience.

Resilience is learned through gaining experience. The model below, developed at the Challenge Learning Center for their work with people facing significant life challenges, shows that we gain experience in cycles. First we "check it out," try something new. This involves setting goals to guide our actions and measure the results, then "doing it," and finally learning from the experience and applying discoveries and insights toward future actions. In the model, the learning and growth gained is proportional to the amplitude gain from cycle to cycle. As it shows, a relatively large amplitude gain over several cycles of learning and growth results in a more resilient configuration.



Building Resiliency through Learning and Growth Cycles

RESILIENCY

4. Helping others develop resilience.

   - Healthy personal development results from family, school, and community environments that support and elicit the innate resiliency or "self-righting" mechanisms within every person.

   - Focus on and engage strengths, instead of deficits (similar to solution-focused vs. problem-focused orientation).

   - 95% of all learning comes from modeling; adults can attain and retain their own resilience and model it for others.

     (Burns, 1994)

   - People at risk are those whose environment, behaviors, and individual characteristics may prevent them from reaching full potential and becoming nurturing, contributing members of their families and society.

   - Risk factors are individual or environmental hazards that increase vulnerability to negative developmental outcomes.

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- We need to identify factors that protect against problems and support or enhance positive factors: self-esteem, close relationship with a parent and/or other adult, educational aspirations. Think of protective factors as vehicular air bags.

- Other protective factors to develop resiliency include: having and using well-developed, problem-solving and coping skills; good social skills (temperaments that elicit positive responses from others to attract and keep supportive relationships around them); knowing how to recognize and resist social influences; religious beliefs; helping others.

- Connectedness to family — to at least one person who accepts them as they are. Constant and clear standards, discipline, and monitoring.

- One or more close friends, school and community connectedness.

(Clark, 1995)

- We must structure opportunities into people's routines to experience feelings of competence, belonging, usefulness, potency, and optimism.

- Organizational/instructional practices may have an important effect on people. Sagor (1996) shows that resilience traits may be reinforced as shown below:

Organizational/Instructional Practices: Resilience Traits Reinforced

Logical consequences	– Potency
Mastery Expectation	– Competence
Service Learning	– Usefulness
Cooperative Learning	– Usefulness
Teacher Advisory Group	– Belonging
Authentic Assessment	– Competence
Student-Led Parent Conferences	– Potency
Learning Style Appropriate Instruction	– Belonging
Activities Program	– Belonging
Portfolios	– Competence

- Rites of Passage used to teach skills needed for survival through life's inevitable transitions. Where are the points of reference for our culture? Today people have replaced ritual with informal activities: escapist entertainment, drinking, smoking, drugs, to accompany their movement through normal life transitions. We need to fill the void with support and connections to a more healthy set of activities.

(Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993)

- People need to have a sense of belonging and value in society. Life has become oriented toward waiting periods of "leisure" with little meaningful contact with other people and the world.

(after Nightingale & Wolverton, 1993)

A Parental Checklist — these factors contribute toward a responsive, supportive and care-giving family environment and help children develop resiliency.

- High aspirations for children
- Active involvement (getting homework done)
- Less crowded homes
- At least one parent or adult that looks out for child's interests
- Small family: 1–4 children, two or more years apart
- Family cohesiveness
- Much attention given to child in infancy
- No prolonged separation from primary caregiver during infancy
- Absence of parental conflict during first two years of life
- Presence of informal multigenerational kin or friendship network
- Alternate caregivers in the household
- High quality of mother-child interaction in infancy and early childhood
- Quality role of father in middle childhood and adolescence
- Advanced parental self-help skills
- Discipline and rule enforcement in household in adolescence
- Dependable substitute childcare

(Pransky, 1991)

Incorporating the Results of Resiliency Research in Experiential Programs

Paradigm Shift: The building of resilient people is a long-term developmental process that involves systemic changes — the fundamental altering of our human systems, including the family, the school, the neighborhood, community-based organizations, and the workplace. Protective-factor research has clearly shown that the development of resiliency is the process of healthy human development that is based on and grows out of nurturing, participatory relationships grounded in trust and respect, and reaching toward valuable goals (Benard, 1993).

As our experiential programs incorporate these features, they will be helping to create what Garmezy (1991) calls a "protective shield" that helps people withstand the multiple vicissitudes that they can expect from a stressful world. In Werner and Smith (1992), the developmental goal is stated as "creating people who are vulnerable but invincible."

To incorporate the results of resiliency research, experiential programs will be based on seeing people as resources, as experts in their own lives, as possessing innate mental health and well-being. Benard offers a paradigm for moving toward a stronger resilience-focus.

Paradigm Shift

From	Toward
Attending to risk factors	Positive development
Pathology	Wellness
Deficiency	Competency
Expert-driven training	Participant-driven training
Competition	Collaboration
Remediation	Empowerment
Ethnocentrism	Multiculturalism
People as problems	People as resources
Authoritarian processes	Democratic processes
Established systems	Emergent systems
Unclear roles	Meaningful roles
Structural change	Inside-out change
Managing people's time	Opportunities for leadership and service
A challenge focus	A discovery focus

(after Benard, 1993)

Handling Inappropriate Behavior: Programs that work with people must have successful strategies for dealing with inappropriate behavior. Here are some observations about how that might be done in a resilience-focused program.

Four Causes of Inappropriate Behavior

1) Need for attention
2) Power
3) Revenge
4) Assumed inadequacy

Five Ways to Handle Inappropriate Behavior

1) Control the number of changes that occur at any one time, and, when there are expected changes, prepare the person for them in advance
2) Present requests as choices
3) Use time-out as a method of defusing high arousal
4) Redirect these people and give them opportunities to make up for what they have done inappropriately
5) Choose your battles carefully.

(Joseph, 1994)

Core Competencies for Program Staff in Resilience-focused Programs

The key to building resilience-positive programs is in the staff-client relationship.

1) The ability to sustain attention.

2) The power to use language and the silences that surround language as a medium of change.

3) The vision to perceive the possibility of transformation that rests within the next moment.

4) Experience with subtle transitions that guide individuals and teams toward skillful beginnings and appropriate endings.

5) The development of a skilled intelligence that can shape what is emerging into a communicable form.

6) The ability to speak, act, and witness truth with compassion.

7) An appreciation of the power of pacing, time, and rhythm in choreographing change.

8) A respect for the capacity of people to transmute suffering into wisdom.

9) A regard for vision and values and an ability to articulate them.

10) Skills that inspire humor, growth, and play.

11) A recognition of the beauty of form — and the need to judiciously break forms.

12) A recognition of the beauty of relationships and the ability to keep them developing through high-stress periods.

13) A sense of the mystery that exists within the ordinary acts of everyday work and life.

(Bronson, 1995)

Conclusion

There is a cartoon which has as its caption: "There is nothing wrong with you that what's right with you can't fix."

This is our opportunity as experiential educators. Not to fix people, but to help them move toward seeing the strengths they have and building with them to handle significant challenge in their work, school, and personal lives. The poet Goethe had resilience in mind when he wrote:

> Distance does not make you falter,
> now, arriving in magic, flying,
> and finally, insane for the light,
> you are the butterfly and you are gone.
>
> And so long as you haven't experienced
> this: to change and so to grow,
> you are only a troubled guest
> on the dark earth.

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